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COACHING ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION AT THE RIGHT TIME TO MOVE PARTNERSHIPS FORWARD¹

Collaborative leaders often use questioning as a coaching strategy to support the goals of the partnership initiative. Using the right types of questions at critical points in the discussion can move collaboration forward by helping to generate new ideas, perspectives, and understanding among participants.

Listed below are a few types of questions that may be useful for collaborative leaders:

Discovery Questions

What is a discovery question: Questions that are intended to promote self discovery or insight into a particular issue, challenge or fear that could generate new ideas or perspectives.

When you might use this: This type of question might best be used when the partnership needs to promote self-discovery, gain insight into fears, generate new approaches, or gain further clarity on the goals of the partnership.

Sample discovery questions:

- What's new or different?
- What's missing?
- What's the current reality?
- What's possible?
- What's the unspoken truth?
- Where are the gaps in knowledge, skills, relationships, attitudes, and behavior?
- What are the unintended results of present attitudes or behavior?

¹ The Leader as Coach, "The Types of Questions Leader Coaches Ask", Retrieved on March 14, 2008, from <http://www.coachinc.com/CCU/Become%20A%20Business%20Coach/Knowledge%20Base/Leader/default.asp?s=1#ask>

Scenario:

You are serving in a collaborative leadership effort to improve services for low-income families and their young children. This State workgroup is made up of members from State agencies, State organizations, the private sector, and early childhood care providers. One of the group's goals is to align all early care and education standards by addressing overlaps and areas where similarities are obvious. The outcome of this endeavor will be to develop a State system of standards that will ensure all children receive high-quality care and education. The group has decided that each member will contribute funds to put the standards crosswalk on a Web site. As time passes, however, it is apparent that some members of the group who had previously agreed to the plan are not able to access funds from their agencies.

Some discovery questions I might use in this situation:

Evocative Questions

What is an evocative question: Questions that seize upon the inherent opportunity available now, foster a search for shared meaning, or create a new or changed context.

When you might use this: This type of question might best be used when the partnership is faced with an unexpected opportunity, wants to change the context or culture of working together, or needs to create meaning and understanding among new members.

Sample evocative questions:

- What is the opportunity underlying this challenge?
- What are we not doing/paying attention to that would shift this situation altogether?
- What are we not talking about that we should be talking about to solve this problem/seize this opportunity?
- If we were to take a radically different approach to this, what would it be?
- If all constraints were removed, what courses of action would be available to us?

Scenario:

The legislative session recently ended. Although it did not pass, a bill was proposed to create a new office of early care and education that would combine the child care subsidy agency and the department of education. Key stakeholders worked together to build public support for the bill. Partners now want to build on this momentum, engage “unlikely allies,” and convince those who opposed the bill of the benefits of a coordinated State agency serving young children and families.

Some evocative questions I might use in this situation:

Forward Action Questions

What is a forward action question: Questions which move the individual or team forward toward their goals.

When you might use this: This type of question might best be used when your partnership’s efforts have reached a significant milestone but need to continue to move forward to a new phase of the project, or the partnership has stalled or plateaued and you need to revise or generate new goals.

Sample forward action questions:

- What steps are necessary to move the project forward?
- What steps will you or the team assume responsibility for?
- What is the best way to bridge the current gap?
- Who else needs to be involved to ensure the project’s success?
- What obstacles need to be eliminated?

Scenario:

The Early Learning Guidelines Stakeholder Group has been working together for 3 years to develop the guidelines. The guidelines have recently been finalized and disseminated, and a kickoff celebration has just been completed. The group is now reconvening to plan for implementation of the guidelines and wants to engage other stakeholders who have not been part of development.

Some forward action questions I might use in this situation: